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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000149

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH OPPOSITION LEADER FICO

CLASSIFIED BY: AMB. RONALD WEISER FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

1. (U) ROBERT FICO, CHAIRMAN OF SMER, MET WITH THE AMBASSADOR ON FEBRUARY 2. THEY DISCUSSED A WIDE VARIETY OF TOPICS RANGING FROM THE UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS TO THE REFERENDUM ON EARLY ELECTIONS TO COALITION POLITICS.

SMER TO SUPPORT SCHUSTER IN THE FINAL HOUR

2. (C) FICO TOLD THE AMBASSADOR THAT MOST MEMBERS OF SMER SUPPORT PRESIDENT SCHUSTER IN THE UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, THOUGH SOME DID SUPPORT HZD LEADER IVAN GASPAROVIC. FICO SAID THAT HIS PARTY WILL ANNOUNCE ITS SUPPORT FOR SCHUSTER JUST PRIOR TO THE FIRST ROUND OF ELECTIONS TO BE HELD ON APRIL 3. FICO ADDED THAT WHILE GASPAROVIC IS AN INTERESTING CANDIDATE AND SHARES SOME OF SMER'S VIEWS, THE PARTY WILL NOT SUPPORT A CANDIDATE THAT HAS LITTLE CHANCE TO MAKE IT INTO THE SECOND ROUND. IN A RECENT MEETING BETWEEN FICO AND SCHUSTER, FICO SUGGESTED TO THE PRESIDENT THAT HIS OPPONENTS WILL TRY TO USE HIS AGE--AT 70 SCHUSTER IS THE OLDEST CANDIDATE IN THE RACE--AGAINST HIM AND THAT TO COUNTER THESE CHARGES, SCHUSTER SHOULD TALK OPENLY ABOUT HIS HEALTH AND VITALITY. (NOTE: IN AN ARTICLE IN SME ON FEBRUARY 2, THE PRESIDENT SAID THAT HE WAS HEALTHIER NOW THAN BEFORE HIS SURGERY IN JUNE 2000 THAT NEARLY KILLED HIM, AND THAT HE PLAYS TENNIS REGULARLY.) FICO SAID THAT SMER WOULD NOT OFFER SUPPORT TO FOREIGN MINISTER KUKAN OR FORMER PRIME MINISTER MECIAR IN THEIR BIDS FOR PRESIDENCY. FICO PROJECTED THAT TWO OF THE FOLLOWING THREE CANDIDATES WOULD MAKE IT INTO THE SECOND ROUND: KUKAN, SCHUSTER, OR MECIAR.

REFERENDUM WILL BE SUCCESSFUL

3. (C) FICO PREDICTED THAT THE REFERENDUM ON EARLY ELECTIONS, WHICH SCHUSTER CONFIRMED IN HIS MEETING WITH FICO WILL BE HELD ON APRIL 3, WILL BE SUCCESSFUL. FICO ESTIMATED THAT 65 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE WILL TURN OUT FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THEREFORE HE THOUGHT THAT THE REFERENDUM WOULD GET AT LEAST THE 51 PERCENT OF THE REQUIRED PARTICIPATION TO MAKE THE REFERENDUM VALID. HE WAS CONFIDENT THAT THE MAJORITY OF THOSE VOTING WOULD FAVOR EARLY ELECTIONS. FICO ADDED THAT LEADERS FROM ANO, THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS (KDH), AND THE HUNGARIAN COALITION PARTY (SMK) WOULD SUPPORT THE CALL FOR EARLY ELECTIONS IN PARLIAMENT IF THE REFERENDUM WAS VALID.

WORKING WITH FREE FORUM

4. (C) WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF WORKING WITH IVAN SIMKO'S FREE FORUM, FICO REPLIED THAT SIMKO HAS INDICATED THAT HIS PARTY MAY SUPPORT SMER-GENERATED CALLS FOR VOTES OF NO CONFIDENCE IN FINANCE MINISTER IVAN MIKLOS AND ECONOMY MINISTER PAVOL RUSKO. FICO ADDED THAT HE EXPECTS TO WORK WITH SIMKO IN PASSING THE LAWS ON CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND PROPERTY DISCLOSURE. FICO OPINED THAT SIMKO HAD MISSED HIS OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME A VIABLE THREAT TO PRIME MINISTER DZURINDA AND THE SLOVAK DEMOCRATIC AND CHRISTIAN UNION (SDKU). FICO CRITICIZED SIMKO'S EXPLANATION TO THE PUBLIC THAT FREE FORUM SUPPORTED THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM BUT IT DID NOT SUPPORT DZURINDA, SUGGESTING THAT THE AVERAGE SLOVAK FOUND THIS EXPLANATION TO BE CONFUSING. (NOTE: IN A LATER MEETING WITH SIMKO, HE INDICATED TO THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE WOULD SUPPORT A NO CONFIDENCE VOTE ON RUSKO BUT NOT MIKLOS UNLESS THE FINANCE MINISTER MAKES A MAJOR MISTAKE OR UNLESS THE ALLEGATIONS FICO MADE AGAINST MIKLOS ARE PROVEN TRUE.)

COMMENT

5. (C) FICO HAS BECOME MUCH MORE POLISHED IN HIS MEETINGS WITH THE AMBASSADOR. HIS VIEWS ON THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND IVAN SIMKO ARE REALISTIC. HOWEVER, SOME OF FICO'S OTHER STATEMENTS CONFLICT WITH WHAT EMBOFFS HAVE HEARD FROM OTHER SOURCES. NONE OF OUR INTERLOCUTORS IN ANO, KDH, OR SMK HAVE SAID THEY WOULD SUPPORT EARLY ELECTIONS. FICO TOLD THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE IS LOOKING FORWARD TO A TRIP TO WASHINGTON THIS SPRING.

WEISER

